

Minutes: Virginia Board of Education
Committee on the Lowest Performing School Systems
Date: October 21, 2003
Location: 2 p.m., Senate Room B
General Assembly Building

A. Welcome and charge to the committee

Mr. Mark Emblidge, chair of the committee, opened the meeting by discussing the purpose of the committee. Mr. Emblidge indicated that the committee would determine what type of criteria should be used to identify the lowest performing school divisions, then the committee would examine school divisions as a whole, and identify those divisions that are low-performing based on the established criteria. Governance issues in school divisions would be examined as part of the factors affecting division performance.

B. Overview of the duties and responsibilities of local school boards and superintendents (Constitution of Virginia and Code of Virginia)

Dr. Cynthia Cave, director of policy, provided the board with an overview of the provisions of the Constitution of Virginia and the Code of Virginia that set forth the duties and responsibilities of the Virginia Board of Education, local school boards, and school division superintendents for the operation and supervision of the public school systems.

The constitution vests the Virginia Board of Education with authority to generally supervise the public school systems, to divide the commonwealth into school divisions, to report to the General Assembly the conditions and needs of public education, to certify to local school boards lists of qualified persons for the office of division superintendent, and to approve textbooks and instructional materials. The board is also given statutory authority to seek school division compliance with the Standards of Quality required by the constitution.

The constitution and state statutes grant local school boards the authority to supervise the day-to-day operations of the public schools. School boards are required to implement and enforce school laws, care for and manage the school divisions' properties, provide for the consolidation of schools, determine the length of the school term, determine the methods of teaching, and hire, employ, and terminate personnel. Each local school board appoints the division superintendent for the division.

C. Current initiatives-the committee next received information regarding current initiatives to identify and assist low-performing school divisions

Academic reviews: Dr. Cheri Magill, director of accreditation, provided the committee with information on the technical assistance the Department of Education provides to

school divisions, and the soon to be implemented division level academic review process. The division level academic review process is designed to help school divisions identify and analyze instructional and organizational factors affecting student achievement. The focus of the review process is the systems, processes, and practices that are being implemented at the school and division levels. The reviews will mirror school level reviews. The reviews will gather information on curriculum alignment, allocation of instructional time, use of data, professional development, improvement planning, instructional method, student achievement, support to schools, and distribution of resources.

“Education for a Lifetime” accountability and efficiency reviews: Mike Shook (Department of Planning and Budget) provided the committee with information on the governor’s recently implemented initiative entitled “*Education for a Lifetime.*” One element of this initiative is an efficiency review program for local school divisions. The purpose of the reviews is to identify savings that can be gained through best practices in organization, service delivery, human resources, facilities, finance, transportation, and technology management, allowing divisions to divert administrative savings back into the classroom.

The pilot review program for this initiative is being conducted by personnel from the Department of Planning and Budget, in consultation with Mr. Thomas Fulghum, former superintendent of Chesterfield County public schools. The Secretary of Finance provides oversight for the pilot program. The team is currently engaged in New Kent, and will shortly begin preliminary work in Roanoke County. The City of Richmond will follow in 2004.

The program is intended to provide superintendents with an outside, consultative resource to examine the way business is done in school divisions and to explore alternatives that may yield savings for the divisions. The efficiency reviews are not audits, and are not intended to ascertain the effectiveness of teachers or the provision of instruction. The efficiency reviews are focused on ways to increase the efficiency, not the effectiveness, of the education process.

PASS program: Dr. Jim Heywood, director of school improvement, delivered a presentation to the committee on lessons learned on school improvement from the governor’s Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools (PASS) program. PASS goals include building the capacity of schools to maintain high student achievement and increasing reading and mathematics achievement in schools currently accredited with warning. Some of the key issues in schools participating in PASS are that curriculum is not fully aligned with the Standards of Learning, data on student achievement often are not used in making instructional decisions, and the same handful of divisions with high percentages of warned schools seem to repeat year after year.

The PASS pairs businesses and community groups with 34 Title I schools facing federal sanctions and employs four academic intervention models to assist low performing schools.

Based on research, seven findings for what divisions can do to improve achievement in all schools were identified for the committee. They include the following:

- Divisions need to have the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the political will to seek solutions.
- Divisions need to implement a system-wide, consistent approach to improving instruction characterized by: aligned curricula, accountability systems, distributed leadership, appropriate allocation of resources, and research-based decisions.
- Divisions need to live and instill a vision that focuses on student learning and guides instruction characterized by practiced high expectations, improving instruction, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for students, and involving parents and community.
- Divisions need to make decisions based on data and research, not instinct, and ensure that data is analyzed to feed both accountability systems and support systems.
- Divisions need to use research-based principles in designing and implementing staff development, provide adequate time for training and planning, connect development to performance goals and a vision, provide training that is designed to meet data-identified needs, develop cadres of in-house experts, support new teachers, invest funds in aligned training, and provide technical assistance to staff in using data.
- Divisions need to redefine and expand leadership roles, increase collaboration, and share responsibility at all levels.
- Divisions need to commit to sustained reform as evidenced by stability of leadership at the superintendent and school board level.

D. Criteria that could be used to identify low performing school divisions

Charles Finley, assistant superintendent for educational accountability, presented the committee with the issue of determining what should be the criteria used to identify low-performing school divisions. The data considered were accreditation ratings of schools for the 2002-2003 school year issued in accordance with the *Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia*, and unadjusted division-level pass rates for the spring 2002 administration of Standards of Learning tests. Division level results for the 2002-2003 school year were not available at the time of this meeting.

As a result of initial discussions, the Department of Education workgroup identified school divisions that had 50 percent or more of their schools rated *Accredited with Warning* for the 2002-03 school year. Only one school division fell into this category. Four divisions had a significant percentage of their schools rated *Accredited with Warning*. Three of the four divisions had fewer than six schools. It became questionable to the workgroup as to whether a percentage of schools warned was a good indicator to use to identify low-performing school divisions.

The workgroup decided to review the unadjusted division-level pass rates on Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in English and mathematics for the spring 2002 administration. Verified data from the 2002-03 administrations are not available at this time. The workgroup set a benchmark of 50 percent passing rate to initially identify the divisions

that might be considered low performing. The workgroup decided that a secondary indicator would be the bottom ten school divisions in overall performance. Results for school divisions at the elementary, middle, and high school level were provided to the committee.

The committee will determine a final methodology for identifying the lowest performing school divisions. The committee may want to recommend including schools rated provisional accredited/needs improvement for the 2003-04 school year, since they are likely to be rated *Accredited with Warning* in the 2004-05 school year with the provisional accreditation ratings cease to exist, and the pass rate for 3rd and 5th grade English increases to 75 percent beginning with the accreditation ratings issued for the 2004-05 school year.

- E. Next Meeting:** The next meeting was planned for November 5th, however, the committee may delay the meeting in order for the Department of Education to have time to receive the most current data.